Something to Be Said for Keeping to Oneself

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ABSTRACT: A collection of original short fiction.

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Cow-killer

The banker was driving down Sir Syed Road when a cow ran across the street. The banker killed the cow. Cow-killer, cow-killer, cow-killer, the remaining five cows all thought as they stood on the other side of the road. It was a busy day, rush hour, and cars sped by: blue, dark blue, gray, dark gray. The cows shook their heads, flapped their tails. They looked away.

The farmer who was taking all the cows to a nearby butcher shop also watched from the other side of the road. His cow, this cow, a beautiful, lumbering thing the color of wheat, now dead on the street. She lay still, almost as if she were playing pretend. The farmer waited for the light to turn red and then, with a slap of his stick, led the rest of the pack. He speed-walked, twisting his body this way and that to avoid the handles of motorcycles, the side-view mirrors of cars. The cows took their time, but they safely reached the island in the middle of the street and regurgitated cud into their mouths. They chewed on the sweetly bland cud. Swish, swish, their tails hit their hides to beat away flies. Swish, swish, they self-flagellated.

The farmer went and flattened his pale palms against the car window. He cursed in Sindhi and, when the banker didn't respond, he cursed him in Urdu.

The banker rolled down his window. It was the first time he had killed something that wasn't smaller than a grain of rice. He grew uneasy, even though he knew it wasn't his fault. The light was green, the cow came out of nowhere. Apart from a handful of curses, the farmer knew little Urdu. But he understood when the banker said FIR. Yes,

the police should be the ones settling the matter. The banker, fury building deep inside him for getting entangled in this, reversed the car and then parked on the side of the road, in front of a tea shop where another herd was gathered: haramis who had nothing better to do than drink tea on benches all day and laugh at men like him who did have better things to do. The farmer herded his cows and once again, with a slap of his stick, led them across the street. Cow-killer, cow-killer, cow-killer, they thought, as they jostled against each other, careful not to step on their sister cow lying on the burning hot macadam.

Sisterfucker, the farmer thought as he watched the banker march ahead of him, arms swinging with each step. He cursed at the banker and at the cows, who were strolling behind him.

Inside the station, the police officer on duty listened to the banker carefully. He took out an FIR form and began writing in neat cursive the banker's name. The farmer's name the banker did not know. Yes, yes, he would send someone from the station to get the dead cow. Better yet, the farmer could go back and get it himself. The police officer didn't want to say that the meat could still be sold. No, he could tell from the looks of the banker that he was the kind of man who would find that kind of talk unsavory. He could tell him that the pelt could still be of use to the farmer. Whoever he was.

The banker felt reassured by the calmness with which the police officer listened to him. You would think he saw cases of cow-killing everyday. But this was Karachi. Maybe cow-killing by car was an everyday occurrence that he had been unaware of as a banker. He accepted the officer's offer of tea, and the two waited under the spinning black blades of the fan for the farmer to arrive.

And soon the farmer did arrive. Except it was the wrong farmer. The farmer who had hurled curses at the banker in the middle of the street was thin and short. The farmer who came in now, tears streaming down his face, was thin and tall. Outside cows mooed, mooed so loudly that the banker and the police officer couldn't hear their thoughts. But what the banker would have heard if he could have heard his thoughts was that this day was growing in strange and dark directions. If the police officer could have heard his thoughts, he would have heard himself thinking that the sisterfucking farmer better put a muzzle on his cows.

Then the other farmer, the real farmer, arrived. Farmer and farmer pled their cases. They pled in Sindhi, which the policeman understood but the banker did not. The banker did grasp the basic sentiments of the farmers: It was my cow. No, it was my cow. If it was your fucking cow then tell me why it had a circle branded on it and not a square like the ones on your cows outside. Do you have a copyright on circles, you sisterfucker. You're the sisterfucker! Sisterfucker!

Outside, the two herds of cows sat and chewed their cud. Shade-stealers, shade-stealers, shade-stealers, thought the ones with the squares branded on their backs as they settled in the direct gaze of the afternoon sun. Cow-killer, cow-killer, cow-killer, thought the ones with circles branded on their backs as they lay in the shade of a willow tree.

The police officer told the sisterfuckers to shut up. How much for the cow, he asked.

I'll settle for seven thousand.

Sisterfucker! It's my cow, and, Sir, I'll leave you in peace for six.

Who is this devil! My cows are healthy cows! They go for much more. But I'll settle for six too thanks to this sisterfucker.

I'm just a poor man, sir. I'll be happy with whatever you give me. But please remember that my cows are my livelihood, my life.

The police officer slammed his hands on the table. The banker was sitting pale-faced. This would never end. He was the victim of a vast farmers' conspiracy. He would have to warn others.

Sir, I know you must be a kind man, but you did run over my cow.

Sir, what is six thousand to you? For me, it is the food I eat, the rent I pay.

Sir, even though you killed my cow, I know you have a kind heart.

The police officer slammed his hands on the table again. Shut up you sisterfuckers, he said. My men are here after having investigated the crime scene. Let me go speak to them.

He stepped over to the other side of the room and a young officer walked over to him. The two whispered. The banker sat in silence. When exactly the police officer had sent his men to investigate the dead cow he did not know.

The police officer cleared his throat. Both you sisterfuckers have been lying. It has come to my attention that the cow was not even hit by the car in the first place. In fact, it died of natural causes—a heart attack, to be more exact.

Sisterfucker, sisterfucker, sisterfucker, sisterfucker, sisterfucker, rang the chorus inside the police station. The police officer with a wink signaled to the banker to leave.

Outside, there was no breeze and the air was heavy. The banker staggered down the steps of the station and found himself surrounded on all sides by reclining cows. They

sat with their thin legs curled under their heavy chests. One cow stood up to shit, right there in front of the banker, in front of everyone.

The banker turned and hurried down the road towards his car. He nearly ran towards it. As he unlocked the car door, he caught sight of the dead cow on the street. Cars, donkey-carts, motorcycles, buses, swerved past it. Black flies, hungry and vicious, hovered over it. The cow's eyes were closed, the long lashes cast downwards. Her two stumpy horns shone in the sunlight. The ground beneath her was wet with blood, but the red barely showed on the dark street.

Far behind him, outside the station, the cows, the ones with squares and the ones with circles, hummed together: cow-killer, cow-killer, cow-killer, cow-killer, cow-killer.

When the banker went home, he told no one about the incident. It was only decades later, as an old man, did he once interrupt a conversation at a dinner party. He said, A long time ago, I killed a cow on the street.

His family laughed, but he continued and he described the events sequentially. He described the angry farmers and the angry police officer. He strained his face, trying to remember if there was anything else to that day. He had entirely forgotten about the other cows.

Severance

Every night, before going to bed, Mrs Tariq takes a set of shalwar kameez from her bedroom closet and walks down the narrow hallway of her apartment to the kitchen, where she leaves the clothes on the counter. When she returns every morning, her shalwar, kameez, and duppata, still warm from the iron, hang on wire hangers. The neck of each hanger is twisted to anchor the hooks to the top of the green Formica cabinet doors. There is the newspaper and a cup of tea on the dinner table. And—at least since the past three weeks—there is Amjad in the kitchen. He is at work and the boxy kitchen is filled with the scent of dish detergent or of boiling rice or even of the coconut oil he oils his hair with.

Today, the smell is the sanitizing citrus smell of detergent. Mrs Tariq, dressed in the blue and gray striped shalwar kameez Amjad ironed for her the previous morning and which she slept in that night, takes her seat at the table and takes a sip of the hottea which leaves her tongue numbed. She didn't sleep well that night. Amjad washes and rewashes the kettle, waiting for Mrs Tariq to give him instructions for the rest of the day.

"I have to go tonight, to a dinner party," she says, her head cupped in her hands, her eyes fixed on the steam that from the tea floats up and up until it is dispersed by the slow blades of the ceiling fan. Amjad turns off the faucet.

"Dinner outside?

"Yes."

"Lunch?"

"Nothing. If I'm hungry I'll have the leftovers from yesterday," she says, "You can make the vegetables if there's not enough for you."

"And how should I make your eggs?" Amjad asks.

"Don't bother," she says, pushing away her teacup.

In her bedroom, the curtains are drawn. Sunlight sieves through the heavy red fabric and the white walls and carpet of the room glow in the same manner a furnace glows as it begins to heat up. Mrs Tariq places the ironed clothes on her bed and then eases herself on her knees. She strains her arms as she tries to reach for the suitcase she keeps underneath.

Mrs Tariq fumbles and, after a few determined lugs, pulls out the suitcase, its tan hard-shell exterior dusty to the touch. Inside it are layers and layers of her evening clothes, each neatly folded and wrapped in tissue, and, on top of each layer of tissue lies a pearly mothball. Here she keeps her brocade saris. They have the colors of gemstones—ruby, sapphire, emerald, amethyst, jade—but each is too ornate, too fusty, for that evening's dinner; the retired Major Iqbal and his wife, Saima, are celebrating their daughter's engagement.

There was a time, in the years immediately following Tariq's death, when Saima and Mrs Tariq were close friends. But the last time she saw either of them was seven months ago. The doorbell rang twice, Mrs Tariq opened the white wooden door that opened in and the black-grill screen that opened out, and found Major Iqbal standing by himself. He immediately fell to explaining that Saima wasn't well. Down with fever, he said. It was the second day of Eid, when Mrs Tariq stayed at home waiting for the occasional guest (a teacher from her school, a neighbor, or, occasionally, Tariq's brother

and the sister-in-law he never lived to see) to come visit her. Her cook—this was before Amjad's arrival—was rolling the tea trolley down the hall when Iqbal stood up and said he needed to leave. Family lunch, he said. There was that moment of clumsiness, the cook with his trolley obstructing the main door, a few laughs, and then, as expected, the promises. Iqbal made her promise she would come visit them. He then promised to visit her again, and for longer, which would be as soon as work eased a bit and Saima got better and his daughter was done with her college exams. After he left, Mrs Tariq looked at the clock in the hall. He had stayed for twenty minutes.

Tonight though, she would need more than twenty minutes of their time. Not all three together, that would be unnecessary, but one of them, either one, for a private meeting. Mrs Tariq knew she could not wait another seven months for a chance encounter. In seven months, the school might ask her to retire. And even if they didn't, in seven months her army widow's pension money would certainly wither down to nothing.

Mrs Tariq walks to the kitchen dressed in the paisley-printed shalwar kameez Amjad sleepily ironed at seven that morning. In her arms is a seemingly endless swaddle of pale-colored lace. As she approaches the kitchen door, she hears him singing. His voice is sweet and off-tune. She clears her throat and waits three heartbeats before walking in. He stands facing her, his arms folded in front of his chest, and dumbly waits for her orders.

Perhaps it is because Mrs Tariq was so accustomed to her first cook—he was with her for twenty years—or, perhaps it is because Amjad is so young and new to domestic work, that even after three weeks of his living with her, she is not at ease with him.

The day he arrived, when the white door swung open inwards and the black screen outwards, she saw in the stairwell a boy who appeared to be only a few years older than her students. He wore olive green shalwar kameez and black leather chappals. His hair was combed, his beard was light, and his hands—clasped in front of him just as they are clasped in front of him as he stands in the kitchen before her—were clean.

He came to replace the old driver, who, like her old cook, worked for her for many years. The old driver was supplied by Saima, who derived as much joy from the matchmaking of men and women as from the matchmaking of servants and households. He stuck with her for twenty-three years and then one morning nearly two months ago, as the car stopped at a red light on the way to her school, he said, "Begum saab, expenses are rising."

She couldn't have increased his pay; she reminded herself this everyone time she took a look at her bank statements. She reminds herself this once again in the kitchen as she hands Amjad the swaddle of lace, instructing him to iron it carefully.

The driver packed his bags. Some of the other teachers offered to carpool. But she couldn't ask for more than that. Her sisters, all four of them, took turns calling from Lahore, convinced that the loss of the driver was a sign she should retire and return home—even four decades after Tariq's death they never could reconcile with the fact that she chose to continue living in Karachi alone instead of returning to Lahore—where a menagerie of nephews and nieces would be at her service. Never again would she need to get up in the morning to go to work. Never again would she need to eat dinner by herself. Their children are her children, their grandchildren would be her grandchildren.

While negotiations continued with her sisters, a kind neighbor called an agency on her behalf and that was how Amjad showed up at her doorstep. To test him, she made him drive in her Suzuki Cultus up and down the road that ran along the dirty beach her apartment faced. He knew the difference between the brake and the accelerator, but little of much else. He can learn, she told herself then, and he wouldn't ask for much.

Then, as if the household didn't see enough changes already, her cook came to her while she was eating dinner one night and told her his brother was dying. He needed to go to the village to help take him of him and would need a loan. He promised to return in a fortnight; he has been gone for six weeks now. Since then Amjad, barely competent at his first job but enticed by the promise of a bonus worth half his regular pay, finds himself fumbling with spices and knives and faded and chipped china in the kitchen.

"You want me to iron these curtains?" Amjad asks as he tugs at the folds of lace.

"That's my sari, not a curtain," Mrs Tariq says, tightening her voice even as she resists the urge to smile.

She watches as he, standing by the ironing table in the corner of the kitchen, unfolds the cloth. The hem falls to the ground. She sees—or rather imagines—the lace, its color a watery purple, sweeping the dark dust on the kitchen floor.

"Wait. Not in here."

Mrs Tariq leads Amjad to the living room where she can keep an eye on him and her sari, and once the ironing table is installed, he wedges himself between it and glass center table. She takes her seat on the other side of the room, on a sofa upholstered with a sensible but fading floral print. On the windowsill four sparrows sitting in a row trill back and forth and the sea breeze strains through the mosquito mesh.

He irons with his back to her while she marks her students' paintings of vases and bottles. It's easy work for her. When she first began teaching she would spend hours composing her comments. Now it comes to her instinctively: "Needs more balance between highlights and shadows," or, if the student is particularly hopeless, a simple "Redo" scrawled on the back of the thick, itchy paper with a red felt pen.

Halfway through the stack of paintings, Mrs Tariq pauses. Somewhere in the sky a cloud has shifted, flooding the living room with hot light. The light pours through the window on her face and her hands, on the paintings on her lap and the floral cushions that surround her, momentarily blanching them all a white tinged with yellow. The light pierces Amjad's coarsely woven kameez and, for a few seconds, before the clouds in rearrange themselves in the sky, she sees the contours of his torso.

She catches herself staring, glances down at the paintings, and then looks up again. There is a rhythm to Amjad's work, and Mrs Tariq watches how, like a machine, he aligns the fabric to the board, sprays water with his left hand, lays a square of cotton on top of the lace for protection and then glides the iron over it. He stands straight, with his head slightly lowered. Mrs Tariq notices his hair is shaved close to the skin. Tariq had the same hair. They all did in the army. She imagines a sheet of tracing paper with what she remembers of Tariq's form lightly sketched on it suspended before Amjad's body. The heights don't quite match, and Amjad is slimmer, more reed like. But in Amjad's straightness of posture, in his sharp shoulder blades straining through fabric, in his calmness of movement, she sees a flicker of Tariq.

Amjad turns to move the sari further across the board and she sees the side of his face and Tariq disappears. Amjad is cherub-faced and boyish, despite the trim beard he

sports. Tariq, with his sunken eyes and thin lips, had always looked older than he was. He was twenty-seven when he died.

"Anything else?" Amjad asks. He holds the sari stretched across his arms and shadows of the lace flowers are cast across his body and on the ground below him.

Mrs Tariq feels the back of her neck grow warm and returns to the paintings on her lap.

The sky dissolves from a pale blue to a warm gold, then is striped with thick strokes of orange and purple, and finally cast inky black. Mrs Tariq dabs perfume on her wrists and adjusts the pleats of her sari one last time before stepping outside. The ride to Major Iqbal's home is short and, except for Amjad's occasional humming, they are silent.

Major Iqbal was in the 1971 war with Tariq. He retired early—there was an injury to his right shoulder that he never fully recovered from—and went on to make a killing with his private security company. Saima kept herself busy as well. She owned a gallery and when her interns mailed out the postcard invitations for the various art and home décor exhibits, Saima made sure Mrs Tariq was always sent one as well. Major Iqbal and Saima had four sons and a daughter, all of whom Mrs Tariq had taught briefly as the only art teacher at the school.

Amjad parks the car and then trails behind Mrs Tariq as they walk through the open gate, past a row of tall men with Kalashnikovs tightly gripped in their hands. 'Atlas Security' is printed on their black polo shirts. They walk past the sprawling garden, where a handful of children are shrieking as they chase each other in circles. Amjad

walks over towards the garage, where a group of men, all drivers, sit on their haunches and drink tea from small green ceramic cups. Mrs Tariq steps inside.

Walking slowly in her heels, careful not to slip on the polished marble floor, Mrs Tariq follows the buzzing sound of people laughing and talking until she reaches the drawing room. Flowers are everywhere. Small white ones float in low basins of water along with tea light candles; bouquets of all colours, wrapped in shiny plastic, are piled atop each other on a side table; rose garlands hang from Major Iqbal, Saima and Manaal's necks—each of them occupying a different part of the room—and jasmine bracelets loosely sit on the wrists of all the women in the room.

"Baaji?" One of the many servants of the household approaches her with a basket half-filled with the bracelets and she takes one.

"Raz…Razia, so happy you could make it," Saima calls out to her from across the room. They exchange the standard niceties and Mrs Tariq slips her a thin envelope of congratulatory money.

As Saima leads Mrs Tariq around the room introducing her to the various guests, Mrs Tariq notices some of the older men slipping one by one into a side room. Major Iqbal seems to have also have disappeared and she imagines him inside, behind the bar with one of his servants, preparing drinks. The men begin to reemerge with glass tumblers wrapped in white napkins. Splashes of amber flash from between the folds of the napkins. Many of these men, now jowl-cheeked and with overgrown eyebrows, were with Tariq in the war. Their younger, slimmer versions were present at their wedding. She remembers Major Iqbal, back then known to everyone as Faiz, being the happiest of the lot. While the other men often simply called her "Aap," avoiding having to address

her by name or title, he made a show of addressing her as his sister-in-law, as if to emphasize his closeness with Tariq. “Bhaabi, how do you like Karachi? Don’t you miss your family?” “Bhaabi, your husband doesn’t talk much, does he?” “Bhaabi, we’ll take good care of him in Dhaka.” “Bhaabi, they were firing at us all day from the pillboxes. Do you know what a pillbox is?”

“Bhaabi, you look wonderful tonight!” Major Iqbal says, his voice a roar above the din, as he comes and stands by his wife. His thick curled moustache gives the impression he is always smiling.

“Yes, you look so elegant Raz. You always do,” Saima says silkily, with one eye on a boy in muddy brown shalwar kameez serving hors d’oeuvres to the guests. The pile of crumpled nakpkins on the gold tray loom over the tiny puff pastries and samosas. Saima excuses herself and then leads the boy through the drawing room and dining room into the kitchen.

“How are you, Bhaabi?”

Mrs Tariq reminds herself to smile as she says, “Congratulations. You must be so happy.”

“Yes, they grow up so fast,” Major Iqbal replies and Mrs Tariq notices his gaze drifting away from her as the conversation collapses into a series of platitudes.

Clutching the pallu of her sari in her hands, she says, “This may not be the best time, but I was hoping I could talk to you.”

“Of course, Bhaabi, we have all the time in the world,” Major Iqbal says, spreading his arms around him as if the wealth that surrounds them has the power to even slow down time.

"No, maybe not right here. It's something more private. I understand you're busy today. Maybe I can come see you this week? At your home, or your office?"

Major Iqbal's eyes return to her and his voice softens, "Everything alright? I have to welcome the guests but once things are settled we can retire to my study to talk? Say after dinner?"

Mrs Tariq exhales for what feels like the first time that entire day. "Yes, thank you. Thank you."

Major Iqbal is pulled into a conversation by some men Mrs Tariq doesn't recognize. She finds an unattended chair in one corner of the room and settles down, wrapping the pallu of the sari around her shoulders. Her mind drifts back to the word Saima used earlier: elegant. When she and Tariq were newlyweds someone, she could never remember who, called them an elegant couple. It was at a dinner party, before the army called Tariq back. Mrs Tariq loved the word. There were many things they weren't as a couple, but there was certainly an elegance about them—about how careful they were around each other. They were always slightly formal with each other, but it was a sign of respect, of not wanting to intrude in each other's private worlds.

Mrs Tariq looks at her husband's friends now, the way they guffaw at each other's jokes, the way they slap each other on the shoulder, the way they eat, unaware of gold crumbs sticking to their moustaches, the way they talk money and politics. Would he have become like them? She wonders if Amjad, sitting outside with the other drivers, jokes and gossips loudly, if he has that side to him.

Mrs Tariq makes small talk with various guests, but in her head she is counting down to dinner, wondering how she would frame her request to Major Iqbal. When Tariq

died, she refused to return home to her parents in Lahore. She continued teaching art, a job Tariq had encouraged her to apply for when he was still alive, and she stayed with her in-laws for a year, feeling like a parasite but drawing comfort from all of Tariq's belongings in that house: the portraits of him as a child in the foyer; the dusty digests in his bookshelf; his shoes, his shirts, and his wrist-watch in the closet; it was the watch she took with her when she finally found her own apartment. All those years she refused all kinds of help from all kinds of people. And tonight, she is begging for alms.

Dinner is served and the guests begin walking towards the dining room. They jostle with each other as they try to form a line for the buffet. Saima hired one of those men who go home to home cooking fresh seafood and the silver basins on the buffet table contain crab claws, fried fish filets, prawn masala, and crab korma. Apart from the claws, every dish seems to be floating in red oil and the smell of fish and spices is pungent. One of the cooks enters the dining room with baskets of hot naan. It's Mrs Tariq's old cook, the one who went to nurse his uncle on his deathbed in the village. The two make eye contact and Mrs Tariq, seated at the dining table along with other elderly guests, can't stop herself from staring at him. He bows his head in deference, or in embarrassment, and then scurries to other side of the room, but not before Saima notices the encounter.

"Wasn't he one of yours? I should have checked with you before hiring him but he showed up at my doorstep a few weeks ago saying you no longer needed him," Saima says.

Mrs Tariq can't tell which one of the two fabricated this face-saving lie, but she is grateful for it. They probably pay him twice as much here, she thinks, while nodding

along to the women seated around her talking about the difficulties of finding good help. She wonders if the drivers gathered outside compare salaries. She wonders what Amjad thinks of this house and how he compares it to her own small apartment.

"And what does your husband do?"

It takes Mrs Tariq a moment to locate where the question came from. It's one of the groom's relatives, a woman perhaps ten years younger than her, her short brown hair perfectly in place. She smiles at Mrs Tariq from a few seats down the table.

"He was in the war…in Bangladesh. He died there." Mrs Tariq watches the woman's face fall, her lips hesitate, but Mrs Tariq does not mind. She's had this conversation many times before.

"He was one of the bravest men in the army," Saima interjects, holding a crab claw in her hands, the spicy red marinade dribbling down her white fingers. "He sacrificed his life for the country." Mrs Tariq sees the rows of eyes from down the table glance towards her.

The story of his sacrifice has been told many times over. Even some of her students—they must have found out from Manaal—would sometimes come to her in the art room after class and, nudging each other with their elbows, ask "Mrs Tariq, is it true? That your husband was a war hero?"

His casket came back covered in garlands and the army awarded gave him a Hilal-e-Jurat, which Tariq's father accepted at the official ceremony. Afterwards he would often say that he had never been prouder of his son.

Back when she was younger and more recently widowed, Major Iqbal often tried to explain to her the circumstances of his death. That when everybody else in the platoon

was retreating, Tariq had surged ahead. They had been stranded on a hill station, barely 70 yards away from the enemy position. He ran ahead, on his own, buying the other men time to safely retreat. But it made no sense to her, no matter how many times Major Iqbal and others who had been in the war tried to explain the events of the day to her. The country called him a hero, a martyr, a shaheed. And she was his widow. No matter what else happened, she would always be a martyr's widow.

Mrs Tariq continues to nod and chitchat with the women around her, but keeps one eye on Major Iqbal at the other end of the table. He is laughing raucously, probably already inebriated, and she wonders if he would even remember their promised meeting by the time dinner ends. He does. After dessert is served and people being to return to the drawing room with small bowls of halwa and ice cream in their hands, Major Iqbal walks up to her and puts his hand on her forearm.

"Should we have our tea in the study?"

"Yes, yes."

A servant is summoned to bring tea for them and Major Iqbal guides Mrs Tariq through the drawing room, down the hall into the study at the other end of the house. It's a small room with dark wallpaper and cognac leather armchairs. Mrs Tariq takes a seat by the bookshelf and sees the volumes of Encyclopedia Britannica, various books on Indo-Pak politics, a book of Hadith, *Clash of Civilizations*, *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, and a few copies of Ayn Rand novels. Major Iqbal takes his seat behind his desk, clearly having already anticipated that the conversation would be business in nature.

"They grow up so fast, they grow up so fast," Major Iqbal says, as if his mind is able to reset itself in each conversation to what he had last said to the person he is with.

"Yes," Mrs Tariq says, "Mannaal looks so happy."

"Ah, yes. The tea," Major Iqbal says, his voice booming so loudly in the small room that Mrs Tariq becomes convinced he is not in full control of himself.

Mrs Tariq turns and it's her cook again. From his expression she could tell he was told to bring tea for Major Iqbal and his guest in the study, but not which guest.

He serves the tea and as he turns to leave the room he whispers, "Salaam, Begum Saab."

She nods at him and after her cook leaves, Major Iqbal asks if he was the one who worked for her once.

"Yes. He said he had to leave because his uncle was dying."

Major Iqbal laughs, "They're all the same, drifting from one home to another. No loyalty."

"Yes, no loyalty."

"So, how are you, Bhaabi?"

Mrs Tariq takes a small sip of tea.

"This is not easy for me to say."

"Bhaabi, I've known you forever. What's wrong?"

"My pension checks have stopped coming."

"Since how long?" He asks, leaning forward on the desk.

"Since February," she replies.

"How have you been managing so far?"

"I have my savings. And I do have my salary," she replies.

"Bhaabi, we both know your salary is nothing," he says.

"I knew the pension would run out someday or another, I knew it would come to this. Maybe I should have planned better. Invested the money somewhere," Mrs Tariq says, more to herself than to him.

"Well, I'm sorry to hear all this."

"I'm sorry to bring this up to you."

"Bhaabi, I'm still alive and working. You shouldn't worry. How much do you think you need?"

It was what Mrs Tariq hoped he would say, but hearing the words aloud creates a new feeling in her. "I would never be able to pay you back. I was just hoping, if it was possible, for you to speak to the pension office, if you still have connections there."

"If that's what you want, but I'd be more than happy to help you. It would be much easier for you than to have to live check by check."

Mrs Tariq doesn't say anything.

"Tariq was my oldest friend in the army. We were completely different, I don't need to tell you this, but we were very close. I like to think that you and I were the ones who knew him best," Major Iqbal continues.

"Yes."

"He meant the world to me. We knew each other since school. In some ways, I like to think, I knew him even better than you,"

"I suppose," Mrs Tariq says.

"Taking care of Tariq's wife. That's something I should do then."

"I suppose."

Major Iqbal smiles and Mrs Tariq sees his eyes are red and she wonders if it is because of the alcohol or the thought of his daughter leaving or the memories of war or a mixture of all three.

"I've wondered, all these years," Major Iqbal says. "I've wondered."

"Wondered what?" Mrs Tariq says, feeling the conversation slip further away from her grip.

"Wondered about the day he died. The way he died."

"But what is there to wonder about?"

Major Iqbal pauses. He stares at the bookshelf behind her. "Just what was he thinking? What was he thinking when he ran back, right in the line of fire?"

Mrs Tariq feels something curdle inside her.

"Like I said, Bhaabi. You and I knew him best," Major Iqbal says, his eyes on her again. "I'm certain you've had your doubts too."

As soon as she steps out of the study, Mrs Tariq hears Saima calling out to her.

"Razia! We're taking photographs, come, come!"

Mrs Tariq shakes her head.

"Come on dear, don't make such a fuss."

"No, it's late. I really must be going."

As Mrs Tariq steps outside, she looks for Amjad and finds him whispering with her old cook. They shake hands and, upon seeing her, say goodbye to each other. Amjad begins walking down the long cobbled driveway to the car with her. She wonders what tricks and excuses the cook must have taught Amjad and how much longer he would stay

at her home. But, she comforts herself, Major Iqbal promised to help her and even if he hadn't, she has made it through so many years that she doesn't need the things others need. She doesn't need children who she would have to raise only to then marry off, she doesn't need a warm body sleeping beside her in bed, she doesn't need someone to wait on her and take care of her—and all this she repeats to herself during the ride back home.

Leaning against the car window, Mrs Tariq thinks of the early days of her marriage and how she had fast learned that she would never be able to forage the depths of Tariq's mind. She knew he wasn't unhappy with her, that was some consolation, but he wasn't like anybody she had ever met. But, if he had to leave her behind—leave her behind with no children whom she could hug and kiss over the years, leave her behind for a lifetime of celibacy—he had found the least painful way to do it. He died a hero and saved her from disgrace. Whatever darkness was within him, it had not been because of her, she knew that.

And, as the car speeds towards the apartment, Mrs Tariq reminds herself that whatever has become of her life, she has been saved from shame. He saved both of them from shame. Here she is: the sensible, elegant widow. And he is here too: Tariq, crystallized in his youth, remains forever untarnished in their collective memory.

Once back inside her home, she turns on a lamp in the living room and takes a seat, her legs weary from climbing the three flights of stairs up to her flat. The bulb behind the velvety gray lamp shade emits a dark glow, like a dying ember, and sitting in the dim light Mrs Tariq feels that she is not inside her home but instead looking at it

through a dusty windowpane. Amjad walks into the living room from the kitchen and stands by the entrance.

"Yes?" Mrs Tariq stiffens.

"Begum saab, would you like tea?"

She holds back a smile and says yes. He returns to the kitchen and from down the hall she hears him the swish of water as he fills the kettle.

Mrs Tariq waits in silence. A few minutes later, Amjad returns from the kitchen, a cup of tea in his hand. He walks up behind her and leans forward to place the cup on the table. His arm circles around her, hovering inches above her own arm, and she sees his forearm, covered with a network of blue veins and a thin down of dark hair. And she smells him, a faint smell that is a mix of musk and sweat. He places the tea on the table and as his hand retreats Mrs Tariq wonders if, by accident, it may graze her shoulder or her back. She is thinking how it would feel, how she would have to react, but before she can answer herself Amjad is already gone, walking down the hallway back to the kitchen, locking the door behind him.

The Other Son

Five days into married life, standing on a footstool in the middle of the newly furnished bedroom, dressed in just her blouse and petticoat and high heels, with her mother-in-law's face inches away from hers, Razia finds herself feeling both naked and on the verge of tears.

Her family tailor back in Lahore ruined her blouses despite all the measurements he took. In the case of the one she is now wearing, it seems he tried to use as little of the silk given to him by her mother as possible. Her arms bulge out from under the cap-sleeves, the waist of the blouse clings too snugly to her ribcage, and a narrow roll of fat, which she didn't even know existed, spills over the top of her petticoat.

Her mother-in-law, whom Razia still hasn't been able to start calling Ammi so she refers to as 'Jee' in her head, has a row of unfastened safety pins pressed tightly between her thin lips. Tiny specks of sweat dot her skin above the lips and the needles of the safety-pins fan out of her mouth. Jee is counting and folding pleats since Razia doesn't know how to tie a sari and that, along with having to stand on a footstool so her very tall mother-in-law doesn't have to keep stooping down, makes her feel like a child.

The vulnerability she feels isn't new; in the six months since Razia first met Jee, she's often found herself on the verge of tears or feeling naked.

She was on the verge of tears when Tariq's parents and brother flew from Karachi to see her. Jee asked her father if Razia, then in her final semester at the National College of Arts, planned on becoming an artist and it was when her father said, "No, no it's just a hobby, at most she'll teach in a girls school," that Razia felt she could cry. She was on

the verge of tears a week later when her mother told her that the family was interested in her, but there was a problem with the names: Raza and Razia. It verged on the ridiculous. Razia liked Raza enough to ignore the silliness of their names, but Raza evidently didn't. Fortunately, Raza had a younger brother Tariq, and neither set of parents found any reason why he couldn't marry her instead. She was on the verge of tears on her wedding night when in the bathroom, as she changed as fast as she could out from her gharara into the ugly nightgown her mother had bought for her and pulled out dozens of pins from her hair, a knot of newspaper fell from her half-undone updo. That morning the hairdresser, finding she couldn't quite work with Razia's unruly curly hair, had stuffed newspaper into the bun to give it more shape and height. Razia stopped to pick up the crumpled piece of paper. There was a blown-up photograph of Nixon and Yahya Khan, their chests puffed out, smiling and waving at an unseen crowd in Lahore. Instead of talking about them, them being Razia and Tariq, all that people talked about at the wedding was Nixon and Yahya and all that time she had the two of them grinning like idiots inside her own head.

Then there were all the times she felt naked as she did now standing on the stool in her blouse, petticoat, and heels. She felt naked when her mother took her to get measured for sari blouses before the wedding. Her mother, who kept a strict eye on her daughters' necklines and hemlines, seemed to relinquish all her views on appropriate attire for young, Sunni-Muslim, Urdu-speaking but Lahore-dwelling, upper-middle-class, adequately-educated women and stood by bored as the tailor took nine different measurements of Razia's chest and arms. She felt naked in the waiting room of the gynecologist's office when she discovered the receptionist was a man and wondered what

he was thinking when she, after her consultation, handed him the slip for the IUD insertion. She felt naked the first time she and Tariq tried to have sex. It was not because she was lying undressed underneath him, but because she saw, and *then* felt, his erection awkwardly protruding from his body and poking at her thigh, and felt naked on behalf of him. She felt naked the next morning at breakfast with Raza and her parents-in-law as she watched them pass tea and toast, acting as if it were any other day, as if Razia was not aware of how all three, even for the briefest of moments, had thought about the couple sitting before them finally having sex and not realizing that the two looked sheepish because they couldn't.

Trying to keep her balance on the footstool, Razia wonders how Jee feels about being in her son and daughter-in-law's bedroom. Jee doesn't seem to feel much.

The lace sari is pale and sheer and at first when Razia's mother showed it to her, Razia loved it. Now, however, she is acutely aware of the cluster of moles on her stomach, of the growing dampness under her arms, and of the small blue bruise on her neck, which she woke up to this morning after yet another night of trying to have sex. Razia untucks the hair behind her ears. Jee glances up at her head and then returns to counting pleats.

Tonight, Razia wants to look pretty. They are going to a dinner hosted by her father-in-law's business partner and for the first time, instead of sitting on stage with her head lowered as a bride must, she would have the chance to talk and mingle and prove to Tariq's family that she belongs with them. In that first meeting when they came to her house in Lahore, after the part where Razia's father said she'd at most become a teacher, Jee had very casually mentioned that their family collected art. That in addition to a few

works by Anna Molka and Chughtai, they had recently been gifted a Sadequain sketch by the artist himself. Razia's parents didn't know who Sadequain was and simply nodded along, but Razia knew that if they did know who he was, they would vehemently disapprove of him. Infidel, they would perhaps say, and find it worse that he's an alcoholic as well. But Razia knew Sadequain and while Jee went on to list the other artists who decorate the walls of her home, she realized that she would very much like to share a home with a Sadequain sketch.

She stares at Jee's face as she wraps and wraps the fabric around her legs. Jee, just like Tariq, is difficult to read. Just yesterday, when Raza and his father were at the factory, when Tariq was at the army college where he is overseeing a trainings course for cadets, Razia went downstairs to have tea with her. When Razia came and sat near her on the sofa, Jee gave Razia a slightly confused smile—as if she'd forgotten that a young woman had moved into the house, that she herself had handpicked Razia for her younger son. And now, as she smoothes the pleats and pins them in place, Jee looks slightly annoyed, as if the pleats aren't sitting the way they are supposed to, as if she shouldn't be helping a grown woman get dressed in the first place.

"Here, just in case," Jee says, more to herself than to Razia, as she takes the remaining two safety pins and hooks the straps of Razia's bra to her blouse.

Jee steps back and Razia gets a good look at herself in the mirror behind her. She was hoping she would look pretty, womanly. She wanted the sari to cling to her thighs like the way women in movies wore it, exaggerating their hourglass figures. But Razia doesn't have an hourglass figure so instead the sari falls straight from her waist to her ankles. She wonders if Jee is as disappointed by her appearance as she herself is. She

wonders if Jee even likes her at all. She wonders if Tariq has told Jee about the problem. No, no. He wouldn't do that. Not to her.

Before the wedding, Razia asked her older sister who was already married what to expect on the wedding night. However, her sister gave a look that suggested Razia's mind was always in the gutter and muttered, "It'll hurt first but then you'll be fine." Her friend Ayesha was more forthcoming. "It'll hurt alright, but nothing you wouldn't be able to stand. And it's going to get messy. Wet. There might be blood and other stuff and you'll have to wash it off before you go to sleep."

"How much other stuff?" Razia had asked.

"Depends on how excited he is."

Razia rolled her eyes as Ayesha laughed. Ayesha then told her about how in some communities mothers-in-law check the bedsheets the morning after the wedding for spots of blood, to ensure that the girl they had accepted for their son was an honest-to-goodness virgin. "Sometimes they'll even hang the dirty sheets with the rest of the laundry in such a place that neighbors and guests get a good look at it." Razia was horrified and Ayesha laughed again. "You'll have nothing to worry about…unless of course there's been some boy you haven't told me about. Anyway, I don't think your high society mother-in-law will do anything of the sort."

Now married, Razia wonders if Jee ever checked the sheets, if not to display to the neighbors, but for her own personal satisfaction. And since there was not a single drop of blood on the sheets, what could she be thinking of Razia? This fear haunted Razia day after day and on the fourth morning she woke up in this new home, long after Tariq

had put on his khaki uniform and left for work, Razia opened the case of oil paints she brought from Lahore and considered painting a bloodstain on the white bed sheets. But if Jee checked the sheets the first morning, it would be unlikely she'd check again. And what if the maid went to wash the sheets and realized the stain didn't quite wash away as it should and then showed it to her mother-in-law? That would be much harder to explain than no bloodstain altogether.

As Jee helps her off the footstool Razia wants to tell her, to blurt out, There's no blood on the sheets and it's not because I'm a fallen, wanton woman. It's because your son, he, him, his *thing* just doesn't fit inside me.

But, of course, she doesn't say anything.

After that talk with Ayesha, Razia spent weeks mentally preparing herself for sex. Anytime there was a romantic movie playing at the cinema, she would beg her parents to let her go. At home, she read one Mills & Boon after another, hiding them all under her mattress when she was done reading them. The novel she returned to again and again was one set in Italy. An Italian count falls in love with a peasant woman who is already engaged, but he won't take no for an answer. *He placed a hand on her chest and felt her heart pulsing wildly within. She began to tremble and he pulled her against him. She felt his heart pulsing wildly within his broad chest.*

Razia waited for that trembling excitement, but it never came to her. And after all the books and films, she couldn't wait to finally be kissed. But the first time proved underwhelming as neither of them knew what to do. A pocket of air was trapped between their lips and it gradually dawned on them that they could, and should, use their tongues. Even during later kisses, when they were better at it, the experience was nowhere as

exciting, as passionate, as she thought it would be. But making up for this disappointment, she was pleasantly surprised to find that she quite liked it when he kissed the space between her neck and shoulder. And she was surprised by how ticklish she was when he kissed her stomach and each time he did that she would, with an involuntary laugh, pull him off her before he could make his way any lower. And she was most surprised, most perturbed and most disappointed, when Tariq, night after night, would kneel between her legs and press his penis into her and it just wouldn't go in—not even a centimeter. The first night they were so embarrassed they gave up immediately. The second and third nights, Tariq tried pressing his penis between the folds of skin but, even with Razia's hands on his hands, trying to guide him in, nothing happened. She tried to relax herself. She imagined her whole body opening up to him, the muscles of her vagina expanding and his penis slowly— painfully even, she was willing to accept—enter her. But instead, her body seemed to shrink, close in on herself, and he was there, sitting between her legs, his erection hanging sadly before them.

They didn't talk about it. Instead, during their first breakfast together, after his parents and brother left the kitchen, Tariq very carefully poured a cup of tea for Razia. He took his time adding milk and sugar, as if he were mixing chemicals in a beaker, before placing the cup in front of her. He did it so carefully, so tenderly even, that Razia didn't have the heart to tell him the taste of tea made her sick. When she thought he wasn't looking, she added two more spoons of sugar, but Tariq caught her and said, "Oh, so you like sweet things." Then, a few minutes later, when she picked up a piece of toast he immediately passed her the bowl of red jam. All her life, Razia had seen women waiting

on their husbands, serving tea, sewing buttons on dress-shirts, fetching newspapers. But Tariq served her, and all the embarrassment of the night before was forgotten.

But despite these small acts of kindness, Razia still can't help but worry about how her body is failing them both and of what he must be thinking. This morning, after showering and before putting on the petticoat and blouse, Razia spread a towel on the bathroom floor and lay down, her hair falling in wet tangles around her face. In the humid Karachi summer it felt nice to lie naked on the bathroom floor after a cold shower. She thought of the Italian count and his peasant love, how she melted in his arms, how he ravished her—she liked the way ravish sounded. When that didn't quite work, she imagined being with Tariq and when she was wet enough she slowly slid a finger inside herself. She felt her muscles tighten around the finger and she squirmed with discomfort but didn't pull out. She moved her finger deeper inside her and, to her relief, felt no thick membrane or dislodged IUD blocking it. The relief, however, was short-lived. If the doctor could put the IUD inside her, if she could put her finger inside her, why couldn't Tariq put himself inside her?

As Jee turns to leave the room, Razia wants to stop her and ask her to take her to a doctor, to anyone. But she chokes and Jee is out the door before a word comes out of Razia's mouth. Razia notes that she left without saying anything about how she looked. There was no polite, "You look nice," or "We'll have to protect you from the evil eye," which is the kind of thing her mother would say whenever Razia or her sister dressed up. Razia powders her face, puts on her bangles, and walks out the room.

In the car, Jee and Razia sit in the back while Tariq, who is driving, and his father sit in the front. Raza is missing.

Trying to sound casual, Razia asks “Isn’t Raza bhai coming to the dinner?”

“He had some plans with friends but he’ll join us later,” Jee replies.

Razia rests her head against the soft leather cushion of the car seat and, gazing out the window at this vast strange city whizzing past her, wonders if Tariq ever makes plans with friends.

Back home, her mother monitored every hour of her life. There was so much of what she could or could not do. Here, she hoped it would be different. She married into the right family, a family that appreciates and buys art, a family that vacations, a family that keeps their home nice and new. But she married the wrong son. Instead of the one who drives around with friends late at night, she married the one who stays back at home and listens to the radio all by himself. Instead of the one who wears nice suits and watches to work, she married the one who has to wear that drab uniform everyday. Instead of the one who dances with his many girlfriends, she married the one who probably never danced and doesn’t seem to have any female friends. The one she married doesn’t talk about going to new restaurants or buying new cars. Instead, the one she married quietly serves her breakfast in the morning and at night hesitatingly reaches out to her in the dark. He doesn’t show his frustration when night after night they have to stop and if only he’d show some anger, say something, Razia would be able to apologize, to suggest that there may be something wrong with her and he should take her to the doctor or even send her back home as broken goods. But he’d never do that. He’s too nice, too polite even, to ever do that. If he were manly the way the leading men in movies are, the way her father and uncles are, he’d fit his role and she’d fit hers and then, by some strange power—she was convinced of this— he’d be able to fit inside her as well.

But he isn't bringing it up and she, all alone in Karachi, has nobody to talk to. If her mother had stayed back a few more days, she would have brought it up with her. But then again, her mother, so proper and conservative, may not have wanted to hear about it. Her sister, meanwhile, would just tell her to close her eyes and get it over with. The only person who could possibly help her is Ayesha. But if she writes her a letter, it may get delivered to the wrong person in the house and Razia can't bear the thought of Ayesha's in-laws reading about her bedroom problems. If she calls her from the phone in the living room, Jee or some maid might walk in and overhear the whole thing. Razia wonders for how long they would go on like this and by the time Tariq parks the car outside the banquet hall where the dinner is being held, she is on the verge of tears all over again.

The people she wants to impress most, namely Raza and his friends, aren't there and instead of conversations on art and society, Razia find herself repeating the same handful of sentences ("Yes, I'm liking Karachi already." "Yes, it's very humid but I'm getting used to it." "Yes, I do want to go visit the beach." "No, I've never seen the sea before in my life.") to a series of faces, young and old, male and female, which by the end of the night will morph into one cloudy face. At first Tariq follows her and Jee around, politely indulging in some of the small talk himself, but he soon finds an army friend and leaves the two women alone.

"Salamailakum," Razia hears someone say behind her. She turns to see a young, mousy-looking woman who appears slightly older than herself. She doesn't recognize her, but she recognizes the older woman, Mrs Jawed, behind her. Mrs Jawed is her father's second-cousin and one of the many extended family members in Karachi she met for the first time in a decade at her wedding. The mousy-faced woman's name is Halima

and she is Mrs Jawed's daughter-in-law. Since there aren't that many young women at the dinner, the two are instructed by Jee and Mrs Jawed to sit together.

Halima and Razia find a quiet spot and as they settle into their chairs, Razia notes how Halima's silk shalwar kameez fit very loosely while her dupatta is wrapped tightly around her head, with only a few wisps of hair peeking from underneath. Her sleeves end at her wrists but as she raises her hands to fix her dupatta, a few inches of skin are revealed and Razia gets a good look at the long dark hair on her arms. This makes her notice Halima's unkempt eyebrows and the dark, greenish shadow above her upper lip. Razia began waxing and threading when she was fourteen and two days before the wedding she went to a salon where, after the usual routine of getting her arms and legs and face done, the waxing girls moved on to her back and chest—places she didn't even know she had hair—and between her legs—where she certainly knew she had a lot of hair—leaving tiny freckles of blood all over her body that faded by the end of the day. It surprises Razia to see Halima, also married, proudly wearing the hair on her face and body. Razia also thinks about Halima looking at her, taking in the bare arms and stomach, at the low-cut blouse, and wonders if her merely sitting in front of her dressed like this is an affront of sorts.

"So are you settled in?"

"Yes, quite so," Razia says, trying to appear casual, coolly distant.

"Don't lie, nobody can settle into a new family so fast," Halima says with a smile. Razia is caught off-guard, but also pleased by Halima's honest jab.

"Well, I guess it's happening slowly, but I am settling in."

"Good."

There's a brief silence and then Halima says, "You and your husband are very nice-looking."

Halima says husband in English, and she mispronounces it as hus-band. The word clangs in Razia's ear but she appreciates the compliment.

"Thank you."

"Yes, I was just telling my mother-in-law, you two look so ele-gant together."

Again, Halima adds one mispronounced English word to the sentence. Normally people just said "congratulations" or at most "you suit each other." Razia once even overheard an old aunt of Tariq's say to another old aunt, "What a relief they were able to find someone for Tariq," as if he were a pity-son and she his pity-wife. But Halima's words feel sincere and Razia warms up to her. She could see how to strangers like Halima someone like Tariq, who is so economical with both his words and movement, can appear elegant. Razia searches for Tariq in the banquet hall as Halima talks about her own husband, the head of the Office of Population Control, which was set up by the World Bank only a few months ago. She spots him, standing with his friend, his hands casually inside his blazer pocket while the friend gestures wildly, and as she watches him Halima describes how her husband's office promotes new forms of birth control. More specifically, his job is to spearhead a grassroots movement convincing poor women, both in urban and rural areas, to start taking oral contraceptives and Halima says the World Bank is shipping containers full of these new medicines for the women of Pakistan. Turning away from Tariq and back to Halima, Razia imagines a giant cargo ship, surging through rough seas, with hundreds of containers stacked inside it. She imagines each steel

container filled to the brim with pills, like sweets in a jar. She imagines this ship, its nose facing the East, gaining speed as it crosses the Atlantic and Indian Oceans.

"Do you have any children?" Razia asks, pushing the conversation ahead, wondering when Raza and his coterie of friends will arrive.

"None. Not yet."

Razia detects the disappointment in Halima's voice and waits for her to continue.

"It's been two and a half years and we still don't have children."

"Two and a half years isn't much."

"It's a lot you know, it really is. My friend got married a week before I did. She's going to have her second baby now. But my hus-band and I...we just don't know why."

"I'm sure you'll have one soon."

"But we've been trying so hard."

"I've heard sometimes it can take time."

"We've been trying so hard. We've been trying and trying for months now. But nothing."

Razia doesn't know what to say. She wonders if Halima even realizes what she's saying and after a pause she musters an "I see."

"We've been trying all the time and I've been praying so hard to God. I pray every day and even with all the praying.…"

Razia doesn't know who Halima's husband is, but she pictures a hulk of a man, tall and broad, with a thick beard and sharp, hawk-like nose. As Halima goes on and on, she can't stop herself from imagining Halima and hus-band, in bed, trying and trying. She can't stop herself as she imagines him, for some reason fully-dressed, heaving on top of

Halima, also fully-dressed, and then wonders how small, mousy-Halima avoids getting crushed under his massive weight. She switches the positions, now with Halima atop husband, still fully dressed but without head-covering. She sees Halima with long straight hair that falls all the way down to her waist.

"Can I tell you something? You can't tell anyone…" Halima says.

"Yes?"

"I'm convinced its those pills my husband made me take. He was sent samples a while back and he made me take them our first year of marriage. I know it's the pills that have messed something up inside me.

"Do you really think so? I'm sure the pills are fine."

"It has to be! Look at our mothers…they never took these Western medicines and they didn't have any problems. My mother got preg-nant eleven times. There were three miscarriages but still she got preg-nant all those times. She had me when she was thirty, you know, and then my two younger sisters were also born. My aunts all have at least six children. But look at me. I took those pills my first year and now, no matter how hard I try, we try, and pray, nothing happens. I swear, if someone ever tells you take these pills you should throw them back in their face."

"Alright."

"My mother-in-law is also getting worried. She found this special prayer. Told us to recite it when we're trying.'

"You mean *while* you're trying?" Razia can't stop herself from asking.

"Well not hundred percent exactly while you're trying...but close enough. Sometimes right after, sometimes right before. I'm sure He," and Halima beckons at the sky as she says this, "understands."

Razia feels something bitter inside her for this woman who talks without thinking. But then, to her surprise, also feels that bitterness dissipate into something hopeful. What are the odds that here Razia is, with nobody to talk to about her conjugal problems, and this woman comes from nowhere and admits everything to her. A cosmic gift. Or a gift from Him, as Halima might say.

Razia leans forward—even though Halima so far has been talking without any fear of being overheard—and whispers, "But are you able to…"

"Yes?" Halima asks, also leaning forward.

"Are you able to…I mean, your husband, does he get it inside you?"

Halima's looks perplexed for a few seconds and then bursts into laughter.

"Of course, what kind of a question is that?"

Razia clenches her mouth. She watches Halima laugh and it becomes clear that she is no guiding light sent to her by the universe. If anything, she's there to put her, a stupid, useless girl, back in her place. It's an affront that women like Halima, bodies like Halima's, would so easily be able to do something so ancient, so primal, so universal that she herself can't.

"I just wanted to make sure" Razia said, on the verge of tears once again. "Anyway, so how often did you have to take those pills?"

Halima returns to her diatribe against the pills and Razia nods along all the while thinking of how all the people in the banquet hall right now were once conceived and

then how they were gestated and then finally born. She thinks of her mother who got married at sixteen and had first daughter, Razia's oldest sister, before her first wedding anniversary. She thinks of all the people across the country, copulating and procreating with such ease, such frequency, that millions of dollars are being spent and dozens of men are being dispatched for the sole purpose of controlling them.

Halima continues to talk, about children and family and God and country. And as Razia listens, she sees Raza walk into the banquet hall followed by a small group of men and women. Raza's not wearing a tie. His shirt is unbuttoned, revealing tufts of dark hair on his chest. The men walking in with him are dressed similarly. There's one woman, tall and thin, wearing bell bottoms and a fitted kameez. Her eyes are lined with thick kajal. There's another one, wearing a diaphanous white sari. Her skin is creamy. Her bare arms and belly are corpulent, sexy. She watches Raza and his friends make their way through the room, whispering and sniggering. Raza strides through the room, and only nods at Tariq as he walks by him.

Razia floats through the rest of the evening. She doesn't talk much to anyone. She keeps an eye on Tariq, and how he quietly eats with his friend, how he stands back in crowds, how he maintains his reticence when his aunts and uncles press him for stories about the army and his new wife. She keeps an eye on Raza, laughing with his friends, sometimes their laughter reverberating across the banquet hall. She watches him light one cigarette after another. She watches him devour his food. She watches him place his hand on the waist of his female friend, the one wearing the diaphanous sari.

In the car ride back, Razia sits right behind Tariq. She doesn't make small talk. She doesn't smile at her father-in-law's jokes or look out the window at the streets and buildings she is slowly becoming familiar with. She sits silently, stewing in her anger. In this moment, nothing can console her. Nothing. Not the lace sari that she loved so much when she first saw it, not being driven around in a shiny car with the softest leather seating, not the promise of a trip to the beach in the morning.

When they reach home, she doesn't smile and say goodnight to her in-laws. Let them think what they want, she thinks, as she walks up the stairs, nearly tripping on her sari. She reaches the room before Tariq does. Let him think what he wants to think, and she pulls off her glass bangles, flinging them and breaking a few as they land hard on the dressing table. She begins taking off the fifteen safety-pins holding her clothes together, nearly pricking herself with one of them as she undoes the sari. She hears Tariq lock the bedroom door behind him. Let him watch, she thinks, not looking up to see where in the room he is standing. She starts unwrapping the sari and there she is in just the blouse and petticoat. Her stomach bulges out over the waist of the petticoat. She undoes the hooks on the side and lets it fall to the ground. She imagines him thinking that she must be one of those girls, the kind who do things, the kind who make scenes and are unpredictable and get angry over small things, over nothing. This makes her even angrier. The blouse comes off, as do her bra and underwear, falling to the ground beneath her in a pile. She looks at herself in the mirror and sees bands of red on her skin from where the fabric had dug into her. Let him be disgusted by her, she thinks and, avoiding his face, she walks to the closet. She takes out one of the silly, ruffled nightgowns and is about to remove it from the hanger when she pictures her mother back in Lahore buying it for her. She

throws the nightgown back inside the closet. She goes and lies down on the bed. She realizes how strange and stupid she's acting, turns over so that she's lying on her stomach, and then pulls the pillow on top of her head. She wants to cry. To cry right now would be the most delicious thing in the world but her eyes are dry and so she has nothing left to do but wait. Let him do whatever he wants, and she holds her breath so that she can hear him better.

She hears the tiny flick of the lights being switched off and she hears Tariq walk towards his side of the bed. Each step is as measured and calm as always. Razia is so angry she could kill him. If she could, she would kill him right now.

She hears some rustling, the mattress sinks slightly as he lies down, and then she feels his arm across her naked back, pulling her towards him. He's taken off his jacket but is fully dressed otherwise. He holds her, but it's not an embrace. It's as if he's pushing her arms into her own body instead of trying to hold her body against his. It takes a few minutes, but then Razia starts crying, softly first and then uncontrollably.

Something to Be Said for Keeping to Oneself

The cab driver dropped her at the wrong end of the block. There she was, left all alone on the curb except for the two suitcases by her side. The house at the corner was white. She walked down the street, past the house with yellow shingles, to the other end of the block where there stood another white house, but with red shutters. The street was soundless except for the rattle of the suitcase wheels against the pavement. She turned around and started walking back to where the cab driver had left her. It was some time between one and two am. She was somewhere between two wrong places.

She nearly walked past the house with the yellow shingles again. The yellow shingles looked beige, not yellow, in the dark. But there it was. A small wooden sign was hanging on the door. 'Colby House' in thin cursive, and below it the number 104. The tears she had been holding back as she looked for the house now fell easily. She wiped her face with the sleeve of her cotton shirt and walked up to the house she had till then only seen in photographs. She rang the bell and waited. It was warm—humid, almost like Karachi. If nobody answers, she thought, she could sit on the wicker chair on the porch until dawn and pretend she arrived in the morning. But then someone shuffled on the other side of the door. A chain clinked and the door opened. Jeremy Colby stood there in his white pajamas.

"Saleema?" He asked, his voice deep, rich.

The light in the narrow hallway behind him glowed warm and pink.

"Saleema? Am I saying it right?" Kelly asked her the next morning in the kitchen, where the thick white light coming in from the windows was nearly blinding. They were all there together: Jeremy Colby, the landlord; Kelly and Brent the other two tenants; and she, the newest resident of the household. When she had first entered the kitchen, she felt she had walked midway into a scene in which she was not an actor. She had watched as they poured steaming coffee into steel thermoses, sank spoons into halved grapefruits, slapped creamy peanut butter on white bread. When Jeremy saw her standing her at the doorway, he said, "Say hello to the young lady from Pakistan." That's what he had said.

"Your name is pretty," Kelly added, once the pronunciation was confirmed. Saleema would rehear that very compliment many times that week. She would hear it from the branch manager who would help her open her new bank account, the receptionist at the UMass international students office, one of her new professors, a Starbucks barista. This was new to her. Back home, Saleema was a name for women of a different generation. An Agnes, an Edith, a Judith. Here, it was an exotic variant of the already exotic Selma. It did not occur to her that the compliment was a gesture of politeness. Instead, it pleased her.

Brent was preoccupied with the coffee machine, but paused to say hello. He was sitting right across from where she stood, and Saleema was struck by the heaviness of his forehead. If he were to turn his head, she was certain, it would protrude farther than his pinched nose. His forehead and the rest of his angular, almost German face belonged to an older man. An aristocrat, an army officer, an actor. His skin, pale and clear, belonged to a baby. Milky, that was the word she was thinking of. As he walked past her out of the

kitchen with his thermos in one hand and his bowl of grapefruit in the other, his head nearly touched the door frame.

"When did you reach Logan?" Kelly asked, her septum-piercing a thin glint of silver against her pink face.

Saleema blinked. The hours hadn't quite straightened in her head. "Around five. Then I took the Amtrak here."

"How long was your flight?"

"Fifteen hours."

Jeremy whistled and Kelly nodded in appreciation.

If Brent had the skin of a baby, Kelly had the body of one. Her face and belly were round, her limbs thick. Barefoot, in frayed shorts and an oversized t-shirt, she toddled around the kitchen as she told Saleema about her job as an apprentice at the Black Sheep Bakery. Saleema noted the shamrock tattoo on her wrist, the butterfly on her ankle. Kelly was younger than her, but how much younger, she could not tell. And Jeremy, smiling and spectating as the two women talked, was old. But older than her father or her grandfather, she could not tell either. He was black. He was the first black man Saleema had ever really met. And to her unaccustomed eyes, black people and East Asian people looked deceptively younger than they were. Conversely, white people looked deceptively older; even Kelly with her tattooed baby body. Saleema did not know if these kinds of observations could be made aloud in America. But Jeremy's age truly did puzzle her. He was bald and clean-shaven. He had deep smile lines, but few wrinkles around his eyes. He was old. He was, certainly—but in a way that was ageless. He downed his coffee and gave her a tour of Colby House.

She was shown the small room behind the kitchen where the laundry machine and dryer were kept. She was shown the router in the living room, its wobbly antennae poking out from behind a vase of daisies, was shown how to reset it if the WiFi signal upstairs weakened . She was shown the back porch where Jeremy Colby pointed at the hooded red grill and promised that on the 4th of July she would taste the best barbecue she'd ever have in her entire life. Saleema didn't remind him that by then she would have graduated from her one-year master's program in communications studies. She didn't tell him that she was planning on observing halal. Saleema was then led down the back porch, across the square garden where the grass was yellow in the heavy sun, through the creaking door in the wooden fence to a quiet alley where there was a large metal container in which she was to deposit her trash every Wednesday.

A woman with a mop of gray hair cycled by them and Jeremy waved at her. The woman said something cheerily as she slipped by them and Jeremy said, "You too!" Saleema wondered if he had told this woman about the young lady from Pakistan.

Jeremy led Saleema back inside to the kitchen. Brent was in the basement and Kelly in the bedroom overlooking the front porch, he told her and he pointed at a staircase near the kitchen that led downstairs and then at a door down the hall. He himself lived on the first floor. He pointed up at the ceiling. And she, Jeremy said as if he were still trying to convince her to sign the lease, lived in the attic apartment that came with its own bathroom, kitchen, and living room. A home within a home.

"A home within a home," Saleema repeated. Four floors, four people. Two men, two women. Two white, two non-white. Such beautiful symmetry they would be living in.

“I can’t tell you how happy Saleema is now that she finally has a sister. She would beg me for one when she was little,” her mother said over dinner.

Alina, Saleema’s new sister-in-law, smiled from across the table. This was the first dinner they were having as a family at home after Alina had moved in. Alina was sitting next to Mohsin, in the seat that once belonged to Saleema. Her father sat at the head of the rectangle glass table, flanked by her brother and Alina on one side, and she and her mother on the other. The change Alina brought was positive. It was symmetric.

Alina had studied law in England and Mohsin asked her to advise Saleema on how to prepare for her upcoming year in America.

“Time will go by so fast, you won’t even know it,” Alina offered.

“I sure hope so,” her mother said, frowning. “Sometimes I feel this country is becoming an old people’s home.”

Her father grunted in agreement. Her mother continued and although she directed her gaze at Alina, it was clear her words were intended for Saleema and Mohsin.

“We see amongst our friends, our neighbors, our own brothers and sisters, how they’re struggling in their old age. It’s not easy, you see,” her mother said. “The children are in New York, in London, in Australia. The ones in Dubai or Jeddah, well, that’s not too bad. The parents can easily visit. And at least they’re Muslim countries. But still, it’s not the same, you see.”

Alina nodded, not daring to break eye contact with her new mother-in-law. Saleema and Mohsin ate in silence.

"First the parents take care of the children. They give them everything. Then the children must take care of the parents. It's only right," her mother said. When she didn't hear the affirmation she sought, she added the punctuating remark: "After all, God made the family so that it stays together."

"Yes, af course," Alina said. Mohsin and Saleema looked up from their plates and nodded.

Mohsin's bedroom—now Alina and Mohsin's bedroom—shared a wall with Saleema's. Before the wedding, Saleema had rearranged the furniture in her room so that her bed was no longer placed against that wall. Her mother could not understand why Saleema needed to move it, especially since Saleema would be leaving for Amherst by the end of the summer. Her departure—her absence from home—had so far been an abstraction. Now—even her mother had come to accept it—it was an inevitability.

Two things had helped Saleema's mother accept her going abroad to get her master's: the first was that the Fulbright stipulated that she must return to Pakistan upon graduation and work for the same number of years in her home country as her time in America. In Saleema's case that was one academic year. Barely nine months. In that time Alina could conceive and deliver a baby. Saleema could undergo a second gestation. But once back in Pakistan there would be little means for her to return to America. The second influence on her mother was a dream. Dreams were very important to Saleema's mother.

Before Mohsin's engagement was formalized, she had instructed everybody in the house to say the special Istikhara prayer before going to bed. In the morning, she asked all of them—Saleema, Mohsin, their father—what their dreams said. Her mother had had

a good dream, Saleema could tell from the brightness in her voice during breakfast. She could not remember her own dream, but implied that it was positive. She liked Alina, and Alina seemed to like her. No need to cause trouble.

"I don't understand all this. I already said yes, you already said yes, Alina said yes, but if I tell you I had a nightmare last night the whole thing comes into question," Mohsin said. Their mother raised her thin eyebrows and he continued with more caution. "I'm just saying. I don't think people like us are all that worthy of God's special messages."

The eyebrows returned to their place. Their mother smiled the way she would back when they as children had asked her why the word for tomorrow and yesterday was the same in Urdu, why people had to die, why their cook hennaed his hair orange.

"It's not about prophecies. It's not about revelations. The dream is just that. A dream. But dreams are made of our inner thoughts, aren't they? They're moving pictures of how we feel deep down, aren't they? So isn't it worth paying attention to them?"

Saleema was surprised by her mother's stance on the nature and significance of dreams. She was used to more doctrinal understandings of the world from mother. And so, when the time came for Saleema to submit her final paperwork to the Fulbright office and her mother asked her to do an Istikhara before mailing the forms, she agreed.

Except she woke up in the morning yet again remembering nothing. She lay in bed and decided she would not leave her room until she had formulated a plan, a theory, an excuse. If she didn't remember the dream, then it was unlikely that it was a nightmare. If she didn't remember the dream, she must have slept well. And what better indication was there that there were no repressed fears or concerns than a night of sound sleep?

When Saleema stepped outside, her mother was in the lounge watching a talk show. She turned it off when she saw Saleema.

"I had the most wonderful dream last night," her mother said, beaming.

Saleema didn't fully understand her mother's dream, but in it there was a child, a little girl, who was playing with dolls. Her mother said it was Saleema as a child. What her mother didn't say was that seeing her as a child meant that she would always remain her daughter no matter how far she strayed— but the implication was already obvious to Saleema. She wondered if that was the same dream her mother had had when she did the Istikhara for Mohsin and Alina. The little girl would then represent a granddaughter. A granddaughter who would always remain a granddaughter.

Upstairs in her attic apartment, Saleema found joy in unpacking. There was little to do since the apartment came with everything: furniture, linens, dinnerware, silverware. Her bedroom was spacious, even with the slanting ceiling, and the furniture, although old, was sturdy and well-proportioned. Saleema neatly placed her clothes in the dresser, but everything fit in the first two drawers. The two lower ones she would have to fill later with the winter clothing she still needed to purchase. She took the framed photograph of her family—a gift Mohsin gave her the morning of her flight to Boston—and placed it on a windowsill. The photograph was from one of the wedding events, with Mohsin in the middle and Alina and Saleema on one side, the parents on the other.

The two suitcases didn't take long to be emptied and, once she was done with them, Saleema went to the kitchen, which was really a nook in the living room. The fridge was pale yellow, an old model, but it was clean and odorless. She would buy

groceries. She would keep the kitchen stocked. She would cook. There was a television in the living room, also an old model. It reminded her of the boxy television her family used to have when she was young. When Mohsin had insisted on replacing it, the old set was given to their orange-haired cook.

Saleema walked barefoot in her apartment and avoided stepping on the thin and faded rugs that had been placed somewhat haphazardly in the rooms. All the homes she had been inside in Karachi had marble or carpeted floors. Here in her apartment, she pressed the soles of her feet against the wooden floorboards, feeling the tremors of movement that spread throughout the frame of the house. In her first few days in the house, she realized she liked living in a house made of wood. During the day, the sounds of life below provided her with company. At night, the singular silence provided her with comfort.

The first few days in Amherst, she lived quietly. There were small sorrows and small joys. One time, as she was on her way out, Jeremy called her into the living room and she went and sat down across from him on a heavy green sofa. He asked her if she was settling in alright. She said yes. He told her, in the same casual tone, that he still hadn't received her security deposit. Saleema's body went rigid. She explained how she had emailed the information to the Fulbright department, that they would be paying for everything, that she was originally supposed to live on-campus but there was a housing shortage at UMass, that she'd call the Fulbright office immediately to see why the deposit had not yet been transferred. Jeremy waved his hand. "That's just fine then. I'm sure it'll all be taken care of." She nodded, but her body remained rigid. As she stood up to leave,

Jeremy walked up to her and put his hands on her shoulders. Laughing a soft, gravelly laugh, he gently shook her. “You have to learn not to get scared so easily, young lady.”

Then there was the night Saleema came home from her first trip to Whole Foods. She walked from the bus stop on Pleasant Street to Colby House on Chestnut with the two brown bags filled with flavored yoghurts, frozen pizzas, frozen burritos, frozen french fries, diced fruit, cereals, a pint of milk, eggs, bread, and a large jar of peanut butter. The bags weighed down her shoulders, her collarbone even. She walked up the two flights of stairs and upon reaching the door to her apartment she found a small white box lying in front of it. Inside, there was a slice of dark chocolate torte layered with berries and a pink Post-It note stuck to the inner base of the box. “Snuck some home from work...enjoy! -K.” Saleema almost started crying.

On her sixth day in Amherst, classes began. During orientation the graduate students in the program, new and old, ate lunch together in a small banquet room that overlooked the towering red brick library and the pond next to it. Nearly half the students were natives of Massachusetts. Nearly the other half were from various small towns in various nearby states: Connecticut, Maine, Vermont, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Delaware, Pennsylvania. There was one Chinese boy who went by Paul because his real name was too tonal for anybody else to pronounce. When Paul spoke in English the tones from Mandarin lingered in his voice and Saleema noticed how the American students got nervous talking to him, afraid of misunderstanding him, afraid of making him repeat himself. There was another brown girl in class, Sneha, but she was second generation. They sat nibbling at their dry tofu wraps and Sneha told Saleema

about how her family moved to Boston from Kerala in the fifties. A few other students then joined their table and it was decided that once orientation ended, they would go out for drinks.

There was a shamrock-shaped neon light outside McMurphy's and it made Saleema think of Kelly's tattoo. A man at the door wearing a Red Sox t-shirt checked IDs. One by one the others from the group showed him their IDs and passed through the door. Saleema rummaged inside her leather tote bag. When her turn came, she pulled out her Pakistani NIC. Everything was printed in Urdu on the pale green card. Everything except for her citizenship number and her birthdate: 09/04/1986. The man at the door studied it carefully and Saleema didn't need to turn around to know that the people from her class standing behind her were becoming fidgety. The card was returned to her, accompanied by a nod, and Saleema slipped inside where the air-conditioning immediately prickled her skin.

Once they were all seated, everybody ordered wings: Buffalo, teriyaki, barbecue, honey mustard. The baskets of wings, brown-red and glistening and indistinguishable from each other, appeared on the table and Saleema watched the bones pile up as she picked at her plate of fries. She was not alone though. There were three vegetarians in the group: Henry, who wore tortoise-shell glasses, had floppy brown hair, and said he was deeply passionate about data journalism; Sneha, who Saleema now suspected came from a high-caste Hindu family; and Enid, whose severe bob seemed at odds with the yin-yang tattoo on her thin ankle. This unspoken kinship ended when the waitress came round for the drinks order. The three inquired about IPAs and other acronyms, and when Saleema's turn came, she whispered, "Water only."

The waitress, sleeves rolled up to reveal thick, freckled arms, placed a glass in front of Saleema. As she took a long sip, a cube of ice left a cold smear on the skin above her lips.

"Hey Saleema," Henry said, from the opposite end of the table, his voice faint over the others. "Where do you live again?"

"Near campus," she said. Henry kept looking. "It's on Chestnut. I like it. The landlord lives below."

"Good! Great! Glad to hear that!"

Henry was friendly and he asked Saleema many questions. He asked her what she did before coming to UMass (she worked at a PR firm and the blogs desk of a local paper), if she had ever seen snow (no, but she had seen glaciers), if she was experiencing jet lag (yes, but it was improving).

"It's good," Saleema said, taking another sip of water, trying not to let the ice touch the skin above her lips. "I mean, it's pretty much over now."

As Henry drank, he became even more inquisitive. Inquisitive and red in the face. He was a Kelly, not a Brent. When a few of the people at the table got up for a smoke, he moved to a chair across from her.

"Do you think you'll stay here after you graduate?"

"No," Saleema said. "I can't. I have to go back after I graduate. That's how it is with the Fulbright."

"Oh, that's too bad. Maybe there's a way around it, you know if you get a job here."

"I don't think so."

"But if you could, you would stay here?"

Saleema wondered why the question mattered to Henry; how her staying here or returning to Pakistan would have any effect on his life. "I haven't really thought about it," she said, hoping he would hear the firmness in her voice.

The waitress came to refill water. Saleema watched as broken cubes of ice tumbled out from the pitcher and plopped into her glass. Henry ordered another drink for himself. She waited for him to ask her another question, but he didn't. In the meantime, Sneha returned from the bathroom and slid into the booth next to Saleema. It was now her turn to be the object of Henry's undivided, eager attention.

"Do you speak Hindi at home?" he asked.

Saleema listened to them talk. Sneha talked about growing up in the same house as her Malayalam-speaking grandparents, about taking bharatanatyam classes as a kid, about her interest in diversity in children's programming.

"And what are your research interests?" Henry said, turning back to Saleema.

Saleema gave him the answer she had earlier given to her parents, her relatives, her former colleagues: "The politics of censorship."

Henry nodded enthusiastically.

The truth was she knew little about the topic and wanted to know little about the topic. More than a year ago, she had learned that a girl at work was applying for the Fulbright and decided to also apply. She worked hard for the GRE, but left the personal statement until the last day. She looked up courses offered at various communication programs in America and she wrote her statement emphasizing the dangers of muzzling the media in Pakistan. She knew what she was doing. In the end, she got the Fulbright

and the girl at work didn't. In the end, she was the one sitting at an Irish pub in an idyllic American small town, not the other girl.

Before Henry could think of another question to ask Sneha or her, the smokers returned. A plan was afoot to move locations, to an apartment two of the guys in the program shared.

The apartment belonged to Andy and Terry, who knew each other from when they were undergrads at UMass. Both were wearing t-shirts that displayed the university logo. Both were big, lumbering guys. When they all stood up to leave, the two towered over the rest. There were eleven of them when they left McMurphy's. Halfway to the liquor store, which was a few blocks from Andy and Terry's place, the number dwindled to six. Saleema was one of the six. She tried to stay close to Sneha and to let her lead the conversation. They quickly exhausted the few territories that intersected their lives: Bollywood, religious dietary restrictions, and threading.

The others walked a little ahead, talking health care, and Saleema noticed how stumpy, almost dwarfish, Henry's body was. That was certainly not an observation that could be made aloud.

It was growing dark and though the heat outside had fallen to a simmer, Saleema felt drops of perspiration slide down her calves. Andy and Terry led the pack and they passed by the Subway where Saleema had dinner the night before, by the Bank of America where Saleema had opened her new bank account.

The liquor store was long and narrow—almost as narrow as a train carriage—and Saleema walked slowly down the aisle. It was her first time inside one. There were high shelves running from one end to another, and she read the labels on the bottles carefully.

Some names she was familiar with from brand placements in movies or from magazines. Smirnoff, of course, she knew. Absolut too she knew, specifically from the ads on CNN. Jack Daniels she knew. Captain Morgan she knew. But there were several others that were unfamiliar to her: Tanqueray, Bombay Sapphire, Hendrick's, Skyy, Grey Goose, Alize, Pinnacle, Vox, Blackheart, Bacardi, Havana Club, Malibu, Contessa, El Dorado, Maker's Mark, Wild Turkey, Red Stag, Elijah Craig, Four Roses, Ballantine's, Crown Royal, Johnnie Walker, Jim Beam, Heaven Hill, Baileys, Kahlua, Fireball, Grand Marnier. Or maybe she had heard of Grand Marnier before. Yes, she probably had. Then there were the beers: Guinness, Corona, Stella Artois, Heineken, Blue Moon, Fat Tire, Dogfish, Budweiser, Pilsner, Pabst Blue Ribbon, Miller Lite, Magic Hat, National Bohemian, Carlsberg, Yeungling, Samuel Adams, Mercury, Harpoon, Buzzards Bay, Smuttynose, Rolling Rock. Saleema was about to start the wine section when she realized the others, all five of them, were standing at the counter. Henry and Sneha seemed to have picked a bottle of red-brown liquid together. Andy was passing a six-pack to Terry. The fifth person standing in line at the counter was Enid. She too had a bottle of red-brown liquid in her hands. Maker's Mark, Saleema recognized by the dripping red wax seal.

She watched from the other end of the store as they chatted. She could walk out of the store right there and then and they wouldn't even notice. But of course they would notice. And the sudden disappearance would bring her even more attention. Saleema would have to wait. She watched them take turns to pay. She watched the bottles slip inside black plastic bags, the credit cards returned to wallets and pockets. Nobody turned to look for her. She could—she should—walk out when she still had the chance.

She caught Sneha's eye. Saleema walked over, past the others, and said, privately, "I think I'll go home now."

"Really? Are you sure?"

Henry overheard them.

"Why leave now?" he asked, walking over to her.

The show of concern was touching. Saleema said, "I'm just very tired. I'll see you guys in class on Monday."

Everybody played their part perfectly. She played her part and exited at the right time, or at least before it was too late. And they—Henry, Sneha, Andy, Terry, Enid—played their parts. They asked again if she was sure about leaving early. They smiled warmly and nodded when she said she had to talk to her mother on Skype. They waved goodbye and said their "see-yous" as she walked out of the store.

She walked fast towards Pleasant Street, the main strip she now knew so well. She turned at the Subway, and walked past an Iranian restaurant and a donut shop. When she reached Antonio's she stepped inside and ordered three slices of pizza. Two plain cheese, one with peppers. There was no place to stand inside and students, young and loud and excitable as toddlers, streamed in and out of Antonio's, which was even narrower than the liquor store. When she stepped outside, the bottom of the pizza box warm against her palms, she felt another burst of energy. Home, home, all she wanted was to go home and shower and lie in bed and eat pizza and watch TV. She walked past McMurphy's, the shamrock glowing green against the dark interior, past a print shop, its shutters drawn, and past the Starbucks. She stopped and turned around. She walked up the ramp to the Starbucks, went straight up to the counter, and ordered a caramel

frappucino. When she stepped out, she had the warm pizza box in one hand and the cold plastic cup in the other.

Home, home, home. Everybody else on the pavement was walking in the opposite direction it seemed, but she slid through the spaces between bodies. When she reached Chestnut, she slowed down. Here, it was quiet and dark, but familiar. She walked by the houses, looking in through the windows. She saw walls wallpapered with floral prints; bookshelves holding thick, worn-looking books; dining tables on which sat bowls of pot-pourri or lemons; cats curled up behind curtains; she saw pianos and paintings and rocking chairs and vases and lamps and clocks. She saw everything but people. The houses were life-sized dioramas for her private viewing.

As Saleema walked down Chestnut, she realized she had been thinking of the word "capuchin." Capuchin monkeys. Where she had heard the word or read it, she did not remember. Capuchin, capuchin, capuchin, she thought as she walked. The plastic frappuccino cup was slick with condensation. The bottom of the pizza box was slick with grease. But she was almost home. Home, home, home. Capuchin, capuchin, capuchin.

The light was on in Kelly's bedroom. The windows in the attic were blacked out. Almost home. Saleema walked up the porch and was about to set down her pizza box and drink on the ground to get her keys when the door swung open.

She was facing the red UMass logo on Brent's t-shirt and heard his nervous laugh. Brent, tall and aristocratic, got nervous too.

"Sorry, here you go," he said, holding the door open for her.

She stepped inside. She had smiled and walked by, no need for words. He played his part by holding the door open for her, but not making small talk. She heard the door

lock behind her as she walked down the hallway and Brent's heavy footsteps on the front porch steps.

Now there were just the two flights of stairs left. As Saleema approached the staircase, she heard Kelly laugh. The laugh came from the kitchen and Saleema, under the laugh, heard layers of other sounds: the buzzing murmur from the television in the living room, something sizzling in the kitchen, and Jeremy's voice, rising and falling. Saleema paused at the foot of the stairs. Kelly said something and the two burst into laughter. "No way!" she protested. Then he said, "Don't you dare burn the steaks! I'll throw you out of here before you even know it." More laughter. Jeremy and Kelly. Landlord and tenant; father and daughter. If they were father and daughter, where was Kelly's real father? If they were father and daughter, what were she and Brent? He could be the surly teenaged son in the basement. And she, an aunt newly divorced who needs time to settle her life, a mail-order-bride who doesn't speak the right language, a madwoman living in self-exile in the attic.

Home, home, home, capuchin, capuchin, capuchin, Saleema walked up the stairs. Inside, the wood surfaces of the furniture and the floor gleamed in the moonlight. Saleema placed the pizza and frappucino on the side table in the bedroom and switched on a lamp. Say hello to the young lady from Pakistan, she thought as her bed, her dresser, her books, her pajamas rolled into a ball on the floor came into view.

She took a long shower and then slipped into a cotton kameez and linen pajamas. She went to her bed, placed her laptop on her lap, and waited for her mother to Skype her. The bedroom window was open, but there was no breeze. It was still inside her room

and the smell of cheese hung in the air. What broke the stillness was the musical ringtone of her mother calling her.

Saleema didn't know why, but it bothered her that her mother Skyped her from the middle of the living room back home. She could see the calligraphy print framed on the wall, the corner of her father's desk, the newspapers lying on the coffee table, the empty cups of tea. She wondered how deliberate this was on her mother's part.

"It's good that the people are friendly," her mother said, her eyes slightly lowered. Saleema could tell her mother was distracted by her own face in the small frame on the Skype interface. "It's good that the people are friendly," she said again. "But be careful. Don't talk religion or politics. You don't want any trouble."

"No, I won't," Saleema said.

"With those things, you never know their politics. They have such a history," her mother said.

"Yes."

"They can't tell a Muslim from a Sikh."

"Yes."

"Better to keep to yourself," her mother said. "Politics, religion. You don't want trouble."

"I know."

"Are you eating alright?"

"Yes."

"What do you eat there?"

Now Saleema looked down at herself in the small frame in the corner of her screen. The pizza box and frappucino were out of view.

"I made dal yesterday," she said.

"Good! If nothing else you'll finally learn to cook while living on your own," her mother said. Tender teasing, that's what it was. But Saleema couldn't help but want to end the conversation.

"How are Mohsin and Alina?"

"Good. You just missed them, they've gone out for brunch."

"I see."

There was a pause and Saleema wondered if her mother was about to cry. It was just an image delay.

"Almost a week already," her mother said, sighing.

"Yes. Time will go by very fast."

Now her mother smiled. "Yes, it will."

They said their goodbyes, but not before her mother reminded her to eat and sleep well. Once the call was over, stillness returned to the room. Saleema straightened herself on the bed and picked up the pizza box. She flipped it open and there sat the three cold slices of pizza. Cheese, cheese, and pepperoni. Peppers, pepperoni, an easy mistake. But her mistake, or the pizza place's? She picked up a slice of plain cheese and took a bite. She walked over to the living room with her pizza and drink and, settling down on the low sofa with the itchy green cover, turned on the television. She found a channel that exclusively played reruns of American game shows from the '60s and '70s. The show that was on was called Tattletales. Celebrity couples were split up; the wives on the main

stage, the husbands in a soundproof room. The wives described an anecdote, the husbands were given a clue; if they guessed right, the audience won money. After a couple of rounds, they women went into the soundproof room and the men were brought into the main stage, which was covered almost entirely with bright green velvet. There was one anecdote in which the celebrity husband talked about how he had to sign a woman's breast at a topless bar. Another in which the celebrity husband was directing his wife and she had to dance naked, but he forgot to give her the cue to start saying her lines and so she kept dancing and dancing, naked, as he became furious at his crew for staring at his naked-dancing wife. Not all the anecdotes were racy. There were anecdotes about children, about pet dogs, about grocery shopping, and Saleema took long, gasping sips of her frappucino as she watched the show. She watched another two episodes—same green velvet, different celebrity couples. She finished her drink. She finished the second slice of plain cheese pizza. She watched more TV.

It was sometime between one and two am when Saleema decided she wanted to walk. Her eyes were dry from staring at the screen. She first walked to her bedroom, then back to the lounge, then to the kitchen, then back to the bedroom. She opened a window and stuck her head out. She went and stood in the middle of the living room and pressed her feet against the wooden floorboards. She felt nothing from below. She imagined all of the others in bed. Jeremy would be sleeping in the middle of a king-size bed. The linens would be white. As would his pajamas. His hand would be neatly folded over the blanket. A dim light would be on in a corner of the room. Kelly, she imagined, would sleep with the light from the front porch streaming in through the curtains. Her sheets would be rumpled around her legs. A bare white leg would turn gray in the light. And Brent, he

would sleep on a mattress, or on a futon. He would wear shorts to bed. He would sleep with his mouth open, the nostrils of his pinched nose insufficient for inhaling air.

Saleema opened the door of her apartment and began walking down the stairs. It was dimly lit, but she could make her way around the house. She was on Jeremy's floor and stood at other end of the hall from where his bedroom was located. She began to walk towards it. If he suddenly appeared, she could say she had heard a noise, that she was—she had to think hard to remember the right word—investigating. In the gray darkness, she studied the photographs hanging on the wall. Jeremy with an old black woman, her hair cropped and white. A wife? No. She was older than him. A mother. She walked farther towards his door. She walked all the way until she could place her hand on its white surface. She kept her hand on the door for a few moments, as if she were feeling a pulse. It was still inside. Saleema turned and went back upstairs.

There was no clock in her room and Saleema turned on the laptop to check the time. It was half past two. Where were Sneha and Henry and Enid and Andy and Terry now? Sneha and Henry, together. Andy and Terry, drunk. Enid, with her severe bob and yin-yang tattoo, with Henry. Henry and Sneha and Enid together. And she here at home. At home, but not alone.

Saleema looked up capuchin monkeys, which led her to Japanese snow monkeys, which led her to Japanese game shows. She tried to find one on YouTube, but instead found clips from American talk shows. She watched clips, clips of interviews with celebrities, impressions of celebrities, stand-up bits, on-the-street interviews, pranks. She and her brother would watch American talk shows together when they were younger. It was past three and she was hungry again. Inside her freezer, she found two frozen cheese

and bean burritos. She had eaten one for breakfast that morning, and one the morning before that. In her fridge she found lemon yogurt, a bowl of sweet melon, half of a peanut butter sandwich, the bread dry and hard. Saleema went to her bedroom and opened the box of pizza again. The pepperoni was not just lying on top of the cheese but was cemented within it. Each circle of red meat was slightly curled with a thin puddle of oil lying in its center. As Saleema plucked the individual pepperoni pieces off the pizza, the grease spilled over the wax-like cheese. Pig grease. Contaminated cheese. She stacked the pieces of pepperoni one on top of the other in one corner of the box. There were round imprints left in the cheese. These things didn't matter to her, but she didn't want to get carried away. Not even with pepperoni. Nine months and she'd return home and it would be better to return as herself than someone else. Saleema took a bite.

As she ate, she read entry after entry on Wikipedia. She looked up an entry on tattoos (*A study of "at-risk" adolescent girls showed a positive correlation between body modification and negative feelings towards the body and self-esteem; however the study also demonstrated that a strong motive for modification is the search for "self and attempts to attain mastery over the body in an age of increasing alienation*") and one on vegetarianism (*Muslims have the freedom of choice to be vegetarian for medical reasons or if they do not personally like the taste of meat*). She looked bharatanatyam (*Bharatanatyam is the manifestation of the ancient idea of the celebration of the eternal universe through the celebration of beauty of the material body*). Celebration of beauty of the material body; Saleema was certain a white person had written that.

It was around five in the morning and Saleema was awake, but in a state of being awake that felt induced by drugs. She set her laptop aside and lay back in bed, watching

the sky fade from a dark inky color to lilac. Sparrows danced amidst the branches of the trees outside and she fell asleep staring at them.

In her dream, Saleema was in a home, a pink home, and she was with Jeremy. He was sitting next to her on a pink sofa and would stand up every few minutes to open the door. He'd look outside, close it, and then come back to sit next to her. The Saleema in the dream laughed and wanted to tell Jeremy to be patient. Then, for the fourth or fifth time, Jeremy got up again, walked over to the door, but this time he opened it wide. He held his arms forward and said, "Say hello to the young gentleman from Tajikistan." On the other side of the door, in the dark, Saleema saw a man standing. He was white-skinned but his cheeks were raw and red, as if from windburn. He had dark hair and his eyebrows were thick and black. His eyes were heavy-lidded, Asiatic, and his cheekbones jutted so sharply that it seemed that God had splintered his bones as a child might splinter twigs. He was thin and expressionless. He stared at her, as did Jeremy, waiting for her to welcome him in.

When she woke up at noon the next day, the light coming in from the windows was yolky and warm. The first thing Saleema did was turn on her laptop and look up images of Tajik men. She must have seen the face somewhere. Her mind couldn't have created him out of nothing. But the men in the photographs she found online bore no resemblance to the face she had seen. Maybe she was looking for the wrong nationality. She searched for Pathan men, Hazara men, Afghan men, Kohistani men, Nepali men. She found the individual features, but not the face. She then pulled up a map of Asia. A strip of Afghan land separated Tajikistan from Pakistan. She had never noticed that that was all that separated the two countries. A strip of land so thin, it was like a woman's

manicured nail curving beyond the tip of her finger. A strip of land so thin, that it was all that separated her from him, except she was here on the other side of the planet and he was nowhere.

Pinwheel

I love a parade, but I didn't see one, a real one, until I was five going on six. It was a month, to the day, to my sixth birthday when I saw my first parade, and it was in Paris. I remember very little of Paris itself, but I remember the parade.

It was nearly sunset and the streetlights were already shining white against the dimming sky and in the parade there were women in gowns covered with fairly lights and there was a marching band and there was this man with a curled white mustache (a fake mustache, his face was very young, I remember) and a white top hat and he was handing out candy-colored pinwheels to the children watching from the sidelines. There were these girls, my age or around, with long hair and big eyes. They looked just like dolls. I watched the white-mustache man give a paper pinwheel to a girl a few feet down from me. He said something to her in French and, as he spoke, he patted her head, right where the big bow was in her gold-brown hair, before proceeding to the other side of the street, which meant cutting through the rows of the twirling fairy-light women, and found another girl, also with gold-brown hair, except straight and not curly like the first one, and gave her a pinwheel and patted her on the head too. I thought he would stay on that side of the road, but I wanted him to come back to me, because, although I did not have gold-brown hair, I did very much want a pinwheel, and if he was a good man, which I thought he was even though he was young and still wore a fake white mustache, he would give me one too.

He walked back to the middle of the street, and by then the fairy-light women had already passed by and the marching band had appeared, marching and playing music,

which was happy and loud music, and he walked back and forth, pretending to poke one tuba player in the belly and stealing another one's hat. He was a clown, not a real clown with long shoes and face paint and a curly wig, but he was just like a clown. He had three pinwheels left (orange, green and pink, I remember) and they were sticking out of the breast pocket of his white blazer and as he pranced around, I watched closely, daring the pinwheels to fall out of his pocket. If they fell, I could wait for the parade to end and ask my parents if I could walk to the middle of the street and pick up a pinwheel from the ground, which I knew they would not say no to.

But the man did walk back towards us, towards me standing there between my father and my mother. As I watched him approach us, I wrapped my arms around my father's leg. The closer the white-mustache man came to me, the smaller I felt. I wanted to become so small that he'd see right through me. I hid my face in my father's back. But I felt my father twist his body and I felt my father's big hands on my shoulders and, with one swoop, he lifted me into his arms.

I was face to face with the white-mustache man. He brought his face very close to mine, and I saw that he was not as young as I had first thought, but he was still young and not old. And the mustache was still not real. I saw that his eyes were blue and small, and the hair under his hat was white top hat was golden-brown. He smiled and said something in French and reached into his pocket and took out the orange pinwheel. He offered the pinwheel to me, but I was clutching my father's shoulders with both hands. I whispered, Pink. I didn't think anyone would hear me, but the white-mustache man did. He returned the orange pinwheel to his pocket and took out the pink one. I wouldn't unclasp my hands so the white-mustache man handed the pinwheel to my father instead and left.

Later that night, in the hotel room, I took the pink pinwheel and went to the long mirror that was fixed on the door. With my right hand I offered the pinwheel to the left, and once it was in the left hand, I raised my right hand and patted myself on the head.

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